

Acts 28: 17-31

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 September 2015

Preacher: Greg Hendrickson

[0 : 00] Turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 28. If you're looking in a pew Bible, that is page 937. This morning we are concluding our eight-month-long series in the book of Acts and reading the last half of the last chapter.

So let's read that together. Acts 28, starting at verse 17. After three days, he, Paul, called together the local leaders of the Jews.

And when they had gathered, he said to them, Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, though I had no charge to bring against my nation.

For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain. And they said to him, We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you.

[1 : 25] But we desire to hear from you what your views are. For with regard to this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against. When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers.

From morning till evening, he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God, and trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.

And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement. The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet, Go to this people and say, You will indeed hear, but never understand.

And you will indeed see, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.

Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen. He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God, and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ, with all boldness, and without hindrance.

[2 : 54] Well, the book of Acts ends with the apostle Paul confined under house arrest in Rome. Rome was the largest city in the ancient world, populated by over one million people.

The city was full of three- to five-story apartment buildings, crammed against each other, surrounded by busy streets on all sides, perhaps with a small interior courtyard within. Most people rented small cubicles, or simple two-room apartments, with no running water, little climate control, and no soundproofing.

Rental prices were exorbitant, four times higher than elsewhere in Italy, but the apartments were notoriously badly maintained. This is where Paul found himself, stuck.

For two whole years, awaiting trial, verse 16 says, Paul was allowed to stay by himself with the soldier who guarded him. He was literally chained to a guard.

The guard would rotate every four hours. He was confined to his simple apartment, and perhaps the hallways and adjoining courtyard of his building. He could receive visitors, but he was restricted from moving about freely.

[4 : 02] Now, some of you may be able to identify with Paul, understand what he was feeling. Perhaps you've visited people in prison, or even spent time in prison, or facing charges, whether

rightly or wrongly.

Maybe you know what that feels like. But even if you've never been confined for legal reasons, I wonder if you felt stuck, or isolated, or confined.

Maybe you feel financially stuck. You're in debt. Or you don't have enough money to get what you want. Maybe you feel relationally isolated.

Perhaps you feel stuck in your house, raising your kids. You feel like you have few opportunities for intellectual engagement, an adult company. Maybe you feel confined in a marriage that isn't what you hoped or expected it would be.

Maybe you feel geographically constrained. Maybe you're here in New Haven for one reason, because your spouse is here, and you would never choose to live here yourself. Or you're here because you're homeless.

[5 : 07] You literally have nowhere else but the shelter to stay. Maybe you look around at all the people from Yale, and you think, what am I here for? I have no value in this city.

Or maybe you are at Yale. Maybe you feel swamped by five extracurricular organizations recruiting you to join them. Freshmen just wait for the bazaar this afternoon. Or by massive amounts of reading expected by your professors, or by the demands of your lab and the pressure to publish. Maybe you feel vocationally confined. Maybe you're unemployed. All the doors seem to be closing on you. Or maybe you have a job, but it feels toilsome and futile and draining.

What we see here at the conclusion to the book of Acts is the Apostle Paul confined and chained. He's been a captive in Roman custody for four and a half years. Two years in Caesarea, six months on the way to Rome, two more years in Rome.

He stood trial before the Jewish ruling council in Jerusalem, before Governor Felix and Governor Festus and King Agrippa in Caesarea. And at the end of the book, he's still awaiting a verdict. But despite his prolonged confinement, the Apostle Paul was not just surviving, he was thriving.

[6 : 24] He was proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. That word boldness can also be translated joyful freedom.

It's a word that means openness, courage, straightforwardness, fearlessness, clear, candid, confident speech without hindrance, without being prevented or restrained, without giving up or holding anything back.

Well, this morning, I want us to see how even when we feel most stuck and isolated and confined that we can not only survive but thrive. that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can speak of the risen Lord Jesus with all boldness and without hindrance.

This morning, I want to look at two things that Paul was convinced of. Two things that made him bold and unhindered, joyfully free to not hold anything back despite his physical captivity.

First of all, Paul was convinced of God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promises to the people of Israel. Now, I would imagine that if you feel stuck or confined or isolated that probably most of us don't immediately think about God's promises long ago to the people of Israel.

[7 : 47] But this is actually a crucial point. Let me explain. The reason why Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts was to introduce Gentiles in the Roman Empire to a faith rooted in the land, the people, and the scriptures of Israel.

If you look at the first few verses of Luke and Acts, Luke addresses a man named Theophilus. He calls him Most Excellent Theophilus. Luke chapter 1, verse 3.

Which may indicate that Theophilus was a high-ranking Roman official. Because Luke uses that same term to refer to Governor Felix and Governor Festus in Acts 24 and 26.

But whoever Theophilus was, the recipient of these books, he seems to have been a recent convert to Christianity, a new believer who had some questions, some uncertainties.

Luke says, at the beginning of his Gospel, I'm writing these things to you in order to assure you of the certainty, of the trustworthiness, of the things that you have been taught.

[8 : 56] Now perhaps you, like Theophilus, are new to Christianity. Maybe you're new to church. Perhaps you have questions or doubts. One of the ways Luke goes about reassuring Theophilus of the trustworthiness of the Christian faith is by showing that in Jesus, God has fulfilled his ancient promises to the people of Israel.

You see, long ago, God promised Abraham that his descendants would grow into a great nation and that through his offspring, all the peoples of the earth would receive God's blessing.

Now if you read the Old Testament at various times throughout Israel's history, it seems like God's plan and God's promise were hanging by a thread and nearly tanked.

Right? At one point, the people of Israel are living in Egypt and they're gradually enslaved. They're living under the tyranny of Pharaoh who wants to annihilate them. They were despairing and embittered but God was faithful.

He raised up Moses and Aaron to set his people free. Well, once they escaped from slavery in Egypt, they wandered in the desert for 40 years and sometimes God himself became so angry at their complaining and disputing and faithlessness and rebellion against him that he nearly wiped them out.

[10:22] But God raised up Moses to stand in the gap and intercede for them. God was faithful to preserve them through the desert. Later on, they entered the promised land but then they were divided by internal rivalries and threatened by enemies who were more powerful than they but God was faithful once again.

He sent his Holy Spirit on a man named David and to save David through mocking and suffering and rejection and exile and death threats. And after David's suffering, God raised David up to glory as the king who unified the people of Israel and defeated their enemies.

But then after David, it all went downhill again. The kingdom divided. The nation of Israel, instead of becoming a light to the world, they became often just as corrupt and immoral and idolatrous as everyone else.

Over and over, God sent the prophets to call them back but they refused to listen. When God called Isaiah to be a prophet, he said, go and tell this people they will hear and not understand.

They will see but not perceive because their hearts have grown dull, their ears heavy, their eyes blind and so the cities will lie waste without inhabitants, houses without people.

[11:40] The land will be a desolate waste. And in 587 BC, that's exactly what happened. Jerusalem was destroyed, the people were carried into exile.

It seemed like it was all over. But once again, God was faithful. He preserved a remnant through the exile and he brought them back home once again.

Over and over through the history of Israel, we see this pattern that despite the people's rejection and unfaithfulness that God was faithful to his word and he was faithful to his people.

And in the gospel of Luke, what Luke shows us is that in the coming of Jesus, God was faithful to his promises to Israel by sending Jesus into the world to be the promised Messiah.

If you read in Luke chapter 1, Mary, the mother of Jesus, proclaims, God has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring.

[12:41] And then Zechariah says a similar thing, blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, he's visited and redeemed his people. He's raised up salvation for us in the house of David as he spoke through his holy prophets from of old.

God's faithful to his promises and as Luke unfolds the life of Jesus, the way Luke tells the story, he shows us that Jesus relived the story of Israel. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness where the people of Israel had spent 40 years and rebelled against God and Jesus faced the greatest temptation of all, Satan himself and he stood firm and he held on to God's word and then Jesus went up to Jerusalem, the city where David had reigned as king and many people hailed him as the king who comes in the name of the Lord.

But Jesus reminded his disciples over and over that his kingdom would not be defined by military force but by service and love. And finally, Jesus relived Israel's greatest tragedy of all, the exile. In his death on a cross, he was condemned, rejected, mocked, and laid waste and buried in a tomb. Once again, it seemed like it was all over.

But once again, in the most glorious way, God was faithful just as God had sustained David through his suffering and later raised him up to glory. God sustained Jesus through his suffering and death and raised him up to glory through his resurrection and not only that, he exalted Jesus as the promised Messiah of Israel and the rightful Lord of all creation.

[14:24] The child of Abraham through whom all the nations of the world would receive God's salvation and God's blessing. That's what Luke wants us to know. And you might ask, what does this have to do with the apostle Paul confined in his house in Rome and what does that have to do with us today?

Well, look at what Paul did in verse 17 when he finally got to Rome. After three days, doesn't waste any time, he called together the local leaders of the Jews.

He intentionally engaged the Jewish leaders in Rome as he had done in every city that he visited because Paul was deeply convinced of God's faithfulness to his promises to Israel.

Paul said in verse 20, it's because of the hope of Israel that I'm wearing this chain. Paul was absolutely convinced of God's faithfulness to Israel and so on the one hand, Paul gladly identified with his people.

Look at verse 17. He talks about our people, the customs of our fathers. Verse 19, he said, I had no charge to bring against my nation.

[15:32] Now, Paul had been beaten up by a Jewish mob in Jerusalem, nearly killed, falsely accused of a capital offense by some Jews from Asia who then no-showed in court during the trial.

Paul probably could have launched a countersuit against them for malicious prosecution. He probably had some evidence, but he says, I have no charge to bring.

Even though he had been badly treated by many Jews in many different places, Paul calls together the Jews in Rome and he says, I want you to know I have nothing against you. I have nothing against our people.

I want to speak with you. I mean, isn't that how many people become prejudiced against one group of people or another? They have bad experiences with some people in a particular group and then they see everyone in that group through that lens.

But Paul did not do that. You see, the Christianity that Paul preached and Luke wrote about is not anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic. In one sense, Christianity is not a new religion that began 2,000 years ago.

[16:48] It's an outgrowth of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that started long before that. The Apostle Paul would have been horrified at the history of Christian anti-Semitism over the last 2,000 years.

Not only people like Hitler who twisted the cross into a swastika and certainly was not a true Christian, but even great Christian leaders like John Chrysostom and Martin Luther expressed deep hostility toward Jews as a people on several occasions.

And then think of all the ordinary German Christians during the Holocaust, some of whom acted heroically, but many of whom remained silent. There's an ugly history of Christians being violent at worst and passive at best toward Jews as a people.

We should recognize it and pray that God will cleanse our hearts and give us the burning love that Paul had for his own people even when he had been badly mistreated by some of them.

Paul gladly identified with the people of Israel. But at the same time, Paul courageously testified to his fellow Jews about Jesus, their Messiah who called for their allegiance.

[18:04] Verse 23, he tried to convince them about Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. In verse 25 to 27, he issued a warning and challenge in the words that Isaiah had spoken long ago.

Paul did not believe that God has one covenant for Jews and another covenant for Gentiles and therefore Christians who were assumed to be Gentiles should not seek to persuade Jews to become believers in Jesus.

Paul did not believe that. Paul himself was a Jewish believer in Jesus the Messiah and he wanted every one of his Jewish brothers in the flesh to become his brothers in the Messiah as well and some did.

Verse 24, some were convinced. Now what does this look like practically for us? To believe in God's faithfulness to his promises to Israel fulfilled in Jesus.

Well for some of us I think the first step would be to become familiar with the first half of our Bible. It's called the Old Testament. Paul reasoned about Jesus from the Old Testament.

[19:12] Many of us don't have a clue what half of the Old Testament is all about. Where do you start? First, read through the Old Testament in large chunks so you get the big picture.

Lots of people get bogged down in the details. Focus on the big story. Listen to it while you're driving in the car. Or if you're strapped for time, read the first and last chapter of each book and skim the rest.

It works sometimes. It doesn't work in Leviticus, just a warning. It works mostly in the narrative books. If you want a study guide to help you get the big picture, there's a great one called Full of

Promise.

It's not a long book. It's a study guide that will help you see the big picture of the Old Testament. I'll give you one for free if you want it, if you'll use it. Or come to the evening service this fall. We're preaching through the book of 2 Samuel.

Focus on the life of David, one of the central characters in the Old Testament. That's a great way to dig into the Old Testament or join a study group that's focused on reading through an Old Testament book.

[20 : 19] So first, let's get to know the Law and the Prophets, the Hebrew Scriptures. For some of us, the first step might be initiating relationship with your Jewish neighbors. If you're a Yale student, go eat at Slifka.

The food's great. Or visit one of the Jewish services over the High Holy Days later this month. Learn from the wisdom that God has given to the Jewish community over the centuries.

If you have Jewish neighbors or coworkers, ask good questions. Like, tell me more about Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. What does that mean to you? In Leviticus 16, it says, on one day of the year, atonement shall be made to cleanse the people from all their sins.

But before you ask your Jewish friend what they think about Yom Kippur, reflect on what the Apostle John says in the New Testament. the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.

That Jesus is that ultimate cleansing sacrifice. He has actually provided that cleansing sacrifice that deep down we all know we really need in order to draw near to God and be made right with God.

[21 : 31] See, as we listen well to God's word in the Old Testament, as we listen well to our Jewish neighbors, we'll be able to testify as Paul did, courageously and freely, about Jesus the Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel.

So that's the first thing that Paul was convinced of. God's faithfulness to his promises to Israel. But the second thing that he was convinced of was God's purpose to bring his salvation to the nations. Verse 28, therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen. And we've seen this theme throughout the book of Acts.

In Jesus the Messiah, God has not only fulfilled his ancient promises to Israel, he's carried forth his eternal purpose to bring salvation to the world, to the ends of the earth.

And this isn't just a New Testament innovation. The prophet Isaiah said to Israel, I will make you a light for the nations that my salvation may reach the end of the earth. That was God's promise to Abraham in the first place.

[22 : 38] You see, this is why in writing a book for Gentile Christians in the Roman Empire like Theophilus, Luke cared so much to establish how God had been faithful to his promises to Israel.

I mean, if you're a Gentile Christian living now, why does it matter if you know how God fulfilled his promises to Israel? Well, one of the answers is because in Jesus Christ, God has now made promises to you, too.

And you need to know how God was faithful to his promises in the past so that you'll be confident that he will likewise fulfill his promises to you in your life, just like he did to them, even when it seems like all is lost, even when you've seriously messed up, even when you're depressed and can't see the light, even when you feel stuck and confined and isolated.

God is faithful to his promises, just like he always has been. Luke wanted Theophilus and all his readers to know that the gospel of Jesus is not just some fringe Jewish sect.

It's not just for one kind of people in one part of the world. It's for all kinds of people everywhere.

And this is why in the book of Acts, Luke has taken us on a long journey from Jerusalem, the focal point of God's promises to Israel, all the way to Rome, the largest city in the world, the capital of the pagan empire, with many twists and turns along the way.

[24 : 04] You know, if you've been journeying with us through the book of Acts or if you've read through it, consider the variety of different people that the gospel of Jesus has touched and transformed along the way from Jerusalem to Rome.

Educated Jewish scholars like Paul who went from being a zealous enforcer of the law to a joyful proclaimer of grace. High-ranking Roman centurions, soldiers like Cornelius whose prayers were answered and on whom the Holy Spirit fell.

Lonely African dignitaries like the Ethiopian eunuch who found in Jesus a treasure better than sons and daughters, better than traveling the world. Intellectual Athenian leaders like Dionysius and Damaris who joined Paul and believed even when others mocked.

Well-to-do businesswomen like Lydia whose heart was open to God and who opened her home to the church. But it wasn't just well-to-do high-ranking intellectual types.

It was also disabled men like Aeneas who was set free from inhibitions and restored to a life of meaningful activity. Devout women like Tabitha who spent her time and resources clothing vulnerable widows with honor and dignity.

[25 : 24] Sleepy teenagers like Eutychus who became living examples of the life-giving power of Jesus. He fell out the window died and was raised to life all in the middle of Paul's sermon.

And a hardened Philippian jailer who nearly killed himself in terror and that same night found joy and salvation through faith in Jesus along with his entire household.

Luke wants us to see the gospel of Jesus is for men and women for rich and poor for Jew and Gentile for world leaders and ordinary folks for prisoners and jailers for able-bodied and handicapped.

It's for all kinds of people everywhere. It's for you. The book of Acts is not a biography of early church leaders. It's not written to glorify the exploits of Peter and Paul or compare them to one another.

Interestingly, Paul's story is left unfinished. For four and a half years for the last eight chapters he's been awaiting trial. Standing trial five times and then it gets continued and passed on to another court.

[26 : 29] On the boat to Rome an angel of the Lord assured Paul he would certainly stand before Caesar and then he gets to Rome and the story ends. No trial before Caesar. No final verdict.

We're left wondering would he be vindicated or would he be martyred? If you want to know what happened to Paul you have to piece together the story from other sources. Most likely he was vindicated and released then carried out a mission to Western Europe perhaps to Spain where he always wanted to go.

That would have been the end of the earth seen then. Two or three years later he came back to Rome where he was arrested and this time beheaded by Emperor Nero. That's the most likely conclusion to Paul's life that we can't be totally sure but that's not where Luke leaves us.

Luke doesn't leave us marveling at Paul. He leaves us marveling at the prevailing power of the word of God to overcome all kinds of opposition as it spreads from Jerusalem to the end of the earth.

He doesn't wrap up the story neatly. He leaves us in the middle of an ongoing story because we are invited to step into that story and continue it. Turn in your bulletin to page four the middle page.

[27 : 45] There's an outline of the book of Acts. Chapter 1 verse 8 quoted at the top the risen Lord Jesus said to his disciples you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

And that's the progression of the book of Acts as you can see in the outline. Now Rome would not have been seen as the end of the earth. It would have been seen as the center of the empire. But as they said back then all roads lead to Rome and therefore if you get to Rome you can get anywhere.

And if the gospel of Jesus can take root in Rome it can go anywhere and everywhere. Now along the way from Jerusalem to Rome the Christian message and the Christian messengers have faced all kinds of opposition both internal within the church and external from opponents.

They faced opposition in Jerusalem from jealous temple authorities who wanted to shut down the Jesus movement from the start. From deceptive church members Ananias and Sapphira who wanted to appear sacrificially generous when they really weren't.

From grumbling Greek speaking widows and neglectful Hebrew speaking Christians that nearly led to a church split right from the start. From greedy magicians in Samaria who wanted to buy the gift of God with money.

[29 : 12] From zealous Jewish Christians who wanted Gentile believers to adopt not only the faith in the Messiah but also their culture and their traditions. From slave owners in Philippi who made a fortune off a fortune telling slave and were furious when she was set free.

From a violent mob in Thessalonica who accused the apostles of turning the world upside down. From mocking intellectuals in Athens who were addicted to novel ideas but allergic to Paul's proclamation of the resurrection.

From well-meaning but mistaken believers in Tyre who urged Paul to take an easier road instead of the difficult and dangerous visit to Jerusalem. From self-serving judges in Caesarea who postponed

their verdicts in hope of a bribe.

From raging storms on the Mediterranean and poisonous stakes on Malta but none of these obstacles could stop the progress of the word of God. There are six major sections in the book of Acts and they each concluded the summary statement about the progress of God's word despite internal and external opposition.

At the beginning of this last major section 19:21 Paul resolved in the spirit to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome and that's exactly what he did. Perhaps not in the way he envisioned but he got there.

[30 : 31] And so Luke's final summary statement verse 31 is a word of triumph. Despite Paul's chains and confinement being stuck in his apartment the message of the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ goes forth boldly and unhindered.

Even in Rome Paul's chains were the gospel's wings. He was chained to a guard that rotated every four hours for Paul that was an ongoing opportunity to speak about the gospel.

He had a captive audience who couldn't leave him even if they wanted to. In Philippians 1 he wrote I want you to know brothers and sisters that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. Furthermore the Christians in Rome were encouraged. Most of the brothers and sisters having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear.

Other Christians also spoke with this joyful freedom without holding anything back. At the end of Philippians chapter 4 verse 22 Paul refers to some in Caesar's own household who had become believers in Jesus.

[31 : 50] When Paul wasn't proclaiming the kingdom of God to his guards or his inquiring visitors or meeting with his fellow Christians who came to visit him and care for his needs he was writing.

Philippians Ephesians Colossians Philemon Ben Witherington in his commentary on Acts concluded it this way no obstacle could hinder the word of God from reaching the heart of the empire and the hearts of those who dwelled there in the end God was sovereign and God was faithful to his word and his people no obstacle was too great for the God who raised Jesus to overcome in bringing salvation to the world that he loved and brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ there is no obstacle that you are facing in your circumstances in your past in your present or in your future that is too great for the God who raised Jesus from the dead to overcome because he is sovereign and he is faithful to his word and his people even when you feel stuck and isolated and confined you too can live with all boldness and without hindrance as the word of God dwells richly in you and when the word of God dwells richly in you the word of God will go forth from you into your workplace into your marriage into your college into your apartment building into the homeless shelter into the prison your prison whatever that might be brothers and sisters live with joyful freedom live without holding anything back

God has been faithful to his promises to Israel and God has purposed to bring his salvation to the ends of the earth to all kinds of people everywhere including us and now we are called to carry on that story let us pray Almighty God we thank you for your faithfulness to your word and to your people for your faithfulness to your promises to Israel and for your purpose to bring salvation to the ends of the earth and we pray that you would empower us as you did Paul by your Holy Spirit that we would live and speak with all boldness and without hindrance in Jesus name we pray Amen